MAKING TECHNOLOGY WORK

Even the Most Advanced Tech Tools Won't Get Results If Dealers Don't Address the Humans Using Them

By Mark Bergeron

The auto industry has fallen hard for new and shiny technology marketed as a way to achieve better sales team tracking and performance, leading in turn to higher revenues.

Or that's the theory, anyway.

As the Edsel proved so well, offering something new and shiny doesn't automatically equate to robust sales. The same is true with today's dealer technology – both hardware and software designed to rev up sales engines.

According to what we've been hearing, just having the stuff will magically transform lackluster sales teams into dynamos.

Here are the realities.

Until or unless sales forces are properly and thoroughly trained on it, technology won't do the job. Unless sales forces adopt and gravitate to it, it won't do the job. If the customer doesn't like it, it won't do the job. Without discipline and consistent use/follow-through with the technology, it won't do the job.

Management, convinced that these shiny objects will be their holy grail, find themselves scratching their heads, criticizing their sales teams for continuing subpar performance, and often doubting the ability of the technology to do what was promised.

Much of the problem stems from our collective preoccupation with two auto industry-centric mindsets: Our love of shiny, new toys in general, as demonstrated by our love affair with cars, and our mistaken belief that "if you build it, they will come."

In this case, the *Field of Dreams* line simply translates to a desire to buy it, power it up, and have the sales magically come as a result. Sort of like starting a vehicle and driving to a destination.

To make technology work to its full potential, it's critical to take several steps, all of which revolve around establishing the solutions you want to achieve and how the technology can plug in to make those solutions a reality.

Here are some recommendations to help you get there. Keep in mind that these suggestions address those dealers already possessing a variety of shiny objects, so the perspective by nature is reactive. Obviously, taking these steps proactively can help steer you in the right direction.

Get sales force buy-in: Often, sales reps will attempt to ignore or circumvent technology they don't understand or don't like, or that demands a level of commitment that doesn't resonate.

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For example, it can be very difficult to get sales-oriented stars to consistently follow a technology process they feel isn't needed for their special brand of "excellence." Sometimes they feel the technology is "beneath them," stifling their seemingly God-given talent to sell cars out of the blue.

And, of course, there are few challenges in life more daunting than spending valuable sales time loading up the CRM.

Getting sales force buy-in requires both tough love and TLC.

On one hand, they must understand there are important, proven, technology-related processes they will need to follow. Regular meetings to assure understanding and check accountability are key to the success of that effort.

A bit of TLC also helps. Showing proof of sales increases with a particular process, such as sales lead charting and tracking, can make even the most hard-headed, arrogant salesperson take notice. And encouragement, via acknowledgement and incentives, doesn't hurt either.

Ensure the technology performs as desired: Substantial disruption and dysfunction work against the solution. Bottom line, if it feels like an irritant rather than a relief it is unlikely to help in the way intended.

It's unrealistic to expect a sales workforce to "waste" time on technology that is balky, redundant or incomplete. If it's not performing up to speed, it's critical to remedy the problem(s) quickly or find a better solution.

Of course, the reality in many situations is that dealerships will stay with the "problem child" because of the investment. But if it isn't doing the job, what's the cost in lost productivity (on all levels, from administrative to sales), creating an unhappy workplace and potentially setting up conflicts between high-performing salespeople and managers forcing them to use something that just doesn't work right?

Invest in thorough training: This should be a no-brainer.

Familiarity breeds contentment, right? Get everyone well trained on a specific process and they will flock to it because they have now mastered a new "toy" and can see its potential to help rev up sales.

Instead, it's often a non-starter for one or more reasons, such as a lack of budgeting for the needed training, leading to learning on the fly, which typically is counterproductive; a lack of management involvement in the time and resources needed to train correctly; and/or sales force resistance to invest their time in training.

In a perfect world, all those considerations can be dealt with before buying a technology system. The solution is to make sure the program you're looking at is thoroughly vetted, the required training is thoroughly vetted, and the process and scheduling the sales force for its introduction can be handled properly.

However, we live in the real world, where often the issues are addressed after going live with a technology solution. What to do? Start with the easiest fixes if possible.

Ask yourself a few questions. What other sales tools or processes can complement/enhance existing technology with minimal training and disruption? How can training be offered in "bite-size" chunks available during slow times or off-hours?

Many online options such as on-demand videos and recorded webinars a salesperson can view anytime are becoming much more common and affordable. In many cases, those can serve as a suitable substitute for group on-site, in-person training.

Interface old-school solutions with new technology: Many dealers with "shiny object syndrome" assume the more technology, the better. In reality, the sales process is still a very delicate human interactive experience, so small changes in technology can make a big difference in customer perceptions.

Always view your new shiny technology in the eyes of your customers. Sometimes, age-old tools like pen and paper still go a long way and can help create the proper interaction.

People don't always view technology as awesome if their human experience is lacking. Writing down wants and needs versus thumbing information into a smartphone can build rapport, help make a deal and contribute to getting a customer for life.

Regardless, you would be well advised to survey the entire landscape, including both digital and paper solutions, to see what will work best for your customers and your team. Look for the solution that seems best suited for your needs and that has a proven track record, regardless of how sexy or shiny it may be.

Hold people accountable consistently and reliably: Quick quiz: How many of you use the lion's share of features and benefits on your Windows or Apple devices? Who maximizes the efficiency and effectiveness of their time management, email, scheduling and task management programs?

Who knows all the bells and whistles of efficiently and effectively formatting a document? Who can use Excel, PowerPoint and other whiz-bang programs without a hitch?

Most of the computer-using world only knows a fraction of those often valuable features. In our already packed-to-the-max days, we learn what we need to know to get by and tend to ignore the rest – at least until some compelling development
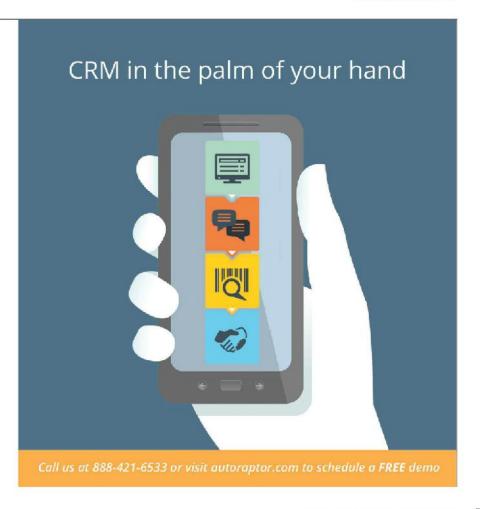
requires us to change our ways.

What results from that? Inefficiency, dysfunction, frustration and ultimately diminished performance. Is there anyone out there who hasn't spent way too much time trying to make document formatting line up to desired specifications because they didn't understand how to work the software?

The same issues apply when viewing technology for sales performance. If a sales rep only knows or uses a small portion of a customer relationship management program – and inconsistently, at that – how can you expect robust results?

The old adage "garbage in-garbage out" means pretty much that for a lot of dealerships' CRM software.

Armed (hopefully) with enthusiastic buy-in and ample training, the critical third piece is accountability. This doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Hold regular meetings to review, reflect and revise. In those sales meetings, review how each team member is using the technology, calling for details that prevent him or her from "faking it."

Once everyone has weighed in, reflect on the group's reports to determine usage trends, insights and tips that merit further consideration for team efforts moving forward. Then revise processes as appropriate to put individual team member input to the best use of the entire management team.

Besides improving efficiency and effectiveness with the technology, that type of sharing and encouragement to find individual breakthroughs further builds buy-in, enthusiasm and a desire to keep going strong.

In the final analysis, Aristotle had it right: Everything in moderation.

Use of the latest "shiny object" technology can help drive sales productivity and customer retention. Or it can do just the opposite if not deployed and used to the best benefit.

But no amount of the latest and greatest technology will replace the importance of the very human qualities of intuition, rapport, knowledge and experience that ultimately add to the bottom line.

By using both in a coordinated and efficient way, the ability to capture, track, follow up with and close deals will be reliable, consistent and powerful.

When everything in your dealership works in sync, it creates a better, more profitable work environment. ∎

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